DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 200 CS 210 781

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TITLE A Case Study of a Reluctant Word Processor: A Look at One Student in a Word Processing Classroom.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; College Freshmen; Computer Assisted Instruction; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Revision (Written Composition); *Student Attitudes; Student Needs; *Word Processing; Writing Difficulties; *Writing Instruction; Writing Laboratories; *Writing Processes; Writing Research

ABSTRACT

A case study examined the writing problems of Jay, a freshman composition student at the University of Massachusetts, to determine how teachers should handle students whose composing styles are not suited to writing with word processors. Interviews, classroom observation, and careful analyses of Jay's essays in progress and logsheets were conducted over the course of one semester. Jay's writing behavior showed that while he concentrated his keyboard revisions on changing single words, his more substantial revisions involved rewriting entire sections by hand and making insertions and deletions in the margins. Jay stated that he preferred the pen and word processor combination because he was hindered by the physical constraints of the computer lab. Physical problems arose because Jay typed much more slowly than he wrote and felt uncomfortable with the word processor's function keys. Noise in the lab also distracted him, and the distance from his dorm to the lab made it inconvenient to use. These problems diminished through the semester, however. Jay also felt unable to type and think at the same time, because trying to remember the word processor commands interfered with his thinking. This problem also diminished with time. Some of Jay's reluctance derived from prejudices against computers from his past experiences, implying that instructors should attend to students' past computer experiences as they try to help students learn to use word processors in writing. (SKC)

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A Case Study of a Reluctant Word Processor: A Look at One Student in a Word Processing Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This case study describes the composing style of Jay, a freshman writer who elected a word processing section of College Writing, and who integrates the word processor into his writing process less than other members of his section of College Writing. In logs, interviews, and informal conversations, Jay reveals his assumptions about the word processor and about computers in general. Jay's first impression of the word processor as impersonal, a hindrance to thinking, and as an object that transforms his messages, affected his writing and revising habits. We can see roots of Jay's frustration with the word processor in his preferred learning style, his working habits, his family, his views of technology, and his sense of identity. This study raises questions about how teachers may best use word processors to accommodate a variety of learning styles and thus support our writing programs.

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I. An Overview

Picture twenty students writing essays in a computer microlab, nineteen of them huddled over their word processors' keyboards and watching the green text scroll by, and one who has pushed his keyboard aside and sits hunched over a spiral-bound notebook. Between the clicks and beeps of the word processing keyboards, his ballpoint pen scratches over the white page. Jay, the subject of

this case study, consistently uses the word processor less frequently than other freshmen writers in this section of University of Massachusetts' College Writing course. He uses his habitual writing tool, a ballpoint pen, for most of his first drafts and subsequent revisions. This report on Jay's composing practices partly addresses **why** he prefers a traditional writing tool, and raises an important question: How can we best accommodate students like Jay? Students who **elect** the word processing sections of College Writing but come to our writing microlabs suspecting that the word processor will somehow hinder their writing or **transform** their messages, making their writing, in Jay's words, "indirect and impersonal"? For Jay, adapting to using the word processor entailed not only a change of habit--switching from his preferred writing tool of a blue Bic pen to a keyboard--but a change in the way he looks at the word processor.

I gathered data about Jay's changing relationship with the word processor through interviews, classroom observation, and careful analyses of Jay's essays-in-progress and his logsheets over the course of one semester. The following is a report on this data, including a description of Jay's writing behavior during three different assignments; Jay's comments about his writing patterns; and concluding with a few questions that students like Jay raise about our strategies for teaching writing in a word processing microlab.

II. A Description of Jay's Writing Behavior

First, I'd like to describe Jay's writing behavior in three different assignments: a comparison/contrast paper; a narrative; and an analysis. Jay wrote a comparison/ contrast paper for his first essay. "Harvard vs. UMass: Is it Worth It?" is an essay in which Jay compares the costs and benefits of the two schools. He wrote his first draft outside of class, by hand in his customary spiralbound notebook. Jay's second draft, written in the word processing lab, was essentially a typed version of his first one, with changes in single words or phrases, and one sentence added. Jay told me he had made these changes to clarify his original meaning or to "avoid repetitions." An example of Jay's attempt to clarify meaning is his revision of the phrase "burdensome decision" to "awesome decision." (Jay thought "awesome decision" was clearer because it underscored the "huge financial considerations" party to the decision whether or not to attend Harvard.) We can see a clear example of Jay's eagerness to avoid repetitions in his change of "university" to "school of higher learning." "I'd said 'university' too much," Jay reported. "That was a problem I had in this essay." Jay added one sentence to this draft between paragraphs where he said, "I needed a transition."

In contrast, the revisions Jay made between his second

and third drafts were more sweeping and involved rewriting the ending and adding new material. Jay made these revisions by pen. He crossed out material by hand and circled sentences in several paragraphs "to see if they had a main idea." Then Jay went back to the keyboard to write his next draft, which again was essentially a typed version of these handwritten changes. And his final draft was virtually identical to this one; Jay repaired only a few tyographical and spelling errors.

The second piece of writing I'd like to look at is "Sailing," Jay's narrative about his experience sailing with his three best friends for twenty-six hours. He began this essay in class, at the keyboard, by writing for ten minutes about an apparently unrelated topic, the death of a close friend's mother and brother in a car accident. Then Jay left the keyboard and opened his spiral notebook to begin writing a rough draft about a different subject: the sailing adventure. As I walked through the class, I noted Jay had switched topics and asked him why he had left the keyboard to write in his notebook. "I can think better [writing by pen]" he said. He finished this first draft of "Sailing" in his notebook.

In "Sailing," again almost all the keyboard-composed revisions were of single words or short phrases. Jay revised this essay mostly by hand, and mostly between his second-to-last draft and his last one. He crammed additional information into every margin of his print-out,

rewrote his opening paragraph by hand three times over the printed version, and drew arrows and wrote notes to himself on every page of the draft. Jay's final draft was essentially a typed version of this much-worked penultimate draft.

The third and last piece of writing I'd like to look at is a piece Jay wrote about his recent work experiences. According to the assignment, Jay wrote two paragraphs about recent jobs he had held, and then developed an arguable proposition about work in general. Jay began the assignment at the keyboard and in ten minutes had written two paragraphs about two different jobs. He then made a hard copy of these two paragraphs and developed his propositions about work by writing in pen at the bottom of this hard copy. Jay submitted this combination of hand-written and typed material to me at the end of class.

II. Jay's Comments About Using the Word Processor

Jay and I have talked often about his writing patterns as they evolved, most formally in three hour-long interviews evenly spaced over the semester. According to Jay, he prefers his combination of writing in pen and at the word processor for two main reasons: he is hindered by the physical constraints of the word processing microlab and, in Jay's own words, he has trouble with "writing at the keyboard and thinking at the same time."

A. Problems with the physical constraints of the word processing lab

The physical constraints of the word processor bothered Jay most at the beginning of the semester. "I find it a lot easier to free-write with my own handwriting," he said in our first interview. "Because I'll think of something and then I can't type fast enough to get it, but I can scribble it down." As well as typing slower than he wished, at first Jay found using the word processor's special function keys too slow. In his words, "I think I [switch from writing with the keyboard to writing with a pen] because if I want to change something I can put a line through it when I want. I don't have to do the arrows and then delete. Because then I'll, you know, put spaces in and then I'll be, all right, What do I want to say? (Laugh) I forgot. I find it a lot easier just to write something in or cross it out."

But by the end of the semester, problems with knowing the keyboard no longer inhibited Jay's use of the word processor. In our last interview, I reminded Jay that he had referred to the word processor as "a glorified typewriter," in our first interview, and I asked him what he thought now. He replied, "It's still that, because if you had to type something in, it's so much easier. But now it's more than a typewriter because I could never just start writing at a typewriter. I can't type that well and

I'd be making mistakes all over the place and it would look terrible. And [now] I can write or create a story right on the word processor. It used to be just a fancy typewriter and now it's something I can actually create on." Later in our last interview, Jay referred to learning to write on the word processor as "learning a new way to communicate."

At the beginning of the semester, Jay felt distracted by the noise in the writing microlab--primarily the noise of the printers. (In fact, the printers remind me of the drone of killer bees too.) By the end of the semester, Jay was less bothered. In his words, "It's definitely easier to write alone--without the printers and everything else. But that's affected me less and less. I just block it out. . . I'm just using [the word processor] more and more."

As the semester progressed, Jay grew accustomed to some physical constraints of the writing microlab, such as the need to learn special function keys and to cope with the noise, but other constraints continued to needle Jay. As he explained in one interview, he didn't like not being able to drink a soda while he worked, and he didn't like not being able to listen to the radio in our word processing lab. But probably the constant constraint that remained the most bothersome to Jay was access. Jay's dormitory is almost a mile from the writing microlab. On many evenings, according to Jay, it was just easier to stay at home and write a draft by hand, than making the trek across campus during open lab hours.

In our final interview I asked Jay what would be the most comfortable way to integrate a word processor into his writing habits, and he described this scene: "Have it in my room. Turn off all the lights but the one I'm working under. Have something to drink. Even having a phone there is good, so if you're expecting a call you don't miss it. It [would have] to be an environment where you feel at home and you can do writing and nothing else."

B. Problems with "thinking" at the keyboard

Jay encountered problems "thinking" at the keyboard that he didn't encounter when writing with a pen, at the beginning of the semester. In his first interview he explained, "I find it a lot easier to just sit down at a desk with my pen and paper and just go through and if I see something just correct it . . . I'm more comfortable writing than I am with typing." In the same interview he mentions being distracted from "thinking" by having to remember word processing commands and by not being able to look back at all that he had written before. Jay felt another constraint when the word processor didn't adapt easily to his habit of inserting visual cues such as circles and arrows.

But by the end of the semester, Jay was using the word processor in earlier drafts and for more extensive revisions. "I'm a lot more comfortable," he reported. "I can get the ideas and get them down. At the beginning,

sitting there with all those people . . .[Now I can] just concentrate on the essay. Don't look around and see what's going on, who's coming in, who's going. I just start to work and I don't think about anything else." I asked Jay what had changed. "Over the course of the semester," he reported, "just using [the word processor] over and over, and getting used to it and getting more comfortable, made me feel right at home at using it in my writing. And now I was thinking that I--make the same changes on the word processor that I would have made by hand ahd that it won't take away from the essay at all. Once I realized that, most of the changes I did I made on the machine."

Jay used "the machine" more often late in the semester, once he realized that composing at the screen did not "take away from the essay" for him. He comments on his more frequent use: "The way I used to think [at the beginning of the semester] was it's kind of like--you--the thought would be going, you know, just right through you and then right through the pen and on the paper, and now it's kind of going from you, through the machine, and then on the paper. It seemed like it would be more indirect and wouldn't be the same, but now I can see what comes out [is okay]." As well as fearing this indirectness, Jay initially worried that writing on the word processor would make his writing more impersonal: "Before the course I'd always looked at computers as being impersonal--and, from my writing, some of it gets really personal. And I'm just

thinking, I'll just write and then I'll type it into the word processor. As I've gotten more comfortable I can see that I can write [on the word processor] the same way as I can by hand and get the same effect."

IV. Jay's Computer Background

One place we can look for causes of Jay's view of the word processor as limiting is in his previous exposure to computers. Although Jay elected to take this word processing section of College Writing, he entered the class with a strong prejudice against computers, and saw word processors as one kind of computer. Jay's attitude towards computers is an echo of the attitude his mother, a nurse and a teacher of nursing, holds. Jay's father is an engineer who works with computers. Jay explained, "He [his father] always thought I should learn how to use [a computer] . . . She [his mother] hates them . . . just because they're so impersonal. She never really was hooked on computers like he was."

Jay's impression of computer-users seems closest to his mother's as well. He described the people who work for his father: "I worked in my father's company last summer and there are guys who just sit there in front of a computer screen . . . for ten hours a day. And you get them in the cafeteria and they're like social idiots. You know, they don't know how to communicate with people. They

just--it's sad. They get in a social scene and they don't know what to do." In an interesting switch, by the end of the semester Jay was differentiating between word processors and all other computers. He said, "This is just writing. On the computer, I think about sitting down and doing a program so it'll do something for you. This is just totally different. It's helping me with something I want to do, so that's--appealing."

Jay identifies himself as bored by computers and hating math and science. A pre-law student, Jay's favorite courses are writing classes and political science. Jay takes great pleasure in writing well; in fact, he claims "writing well is one of the best things I can do." However, Jay's initial perception of the word processor as a computer that hinders personal communication, transforms directness into indirectness, and frustrates thinking, almost certainly slowed his integration of the word processor into his writing process.

Jay's reluctance is not, I believe, an example of computerphobia; Jay is an experienced programmer and computer-user. But Jay provides us with an example of a student who projects his suspicions of computers onto the word processor; he reveals the word processor as an object mirrors Jay's own feelings and prejudices and even view of the world.

V. CONCLUSION

Jay grew more comfortable making large-scale revisions in his narratives by the end of the semester. He still begins essays in pen, even in the writing microlab, but often switches to the word processor early in his first draft. In this respect, and in his growing enthusiasm for the word processor, Jay's writing behavior parallels the behavior of other students in the microlab.

According to a poll taken at the end of the Fall 1985 semester of University of Massachusetts students in the word processing sections (about 240 students each semester) of College Writing, 48% of them said they do not begin their essays on the word processor and do not use the word processor for listmaking or brainstorming. 80% of our students came into the word processing microlab with feelings ranging from interest to enthusiasm. And 96% of those polled said given the opportunity, they would do their future writing on word processors.

As students enter our classes having had a variety of computer experiences, we need to pay attention to how their already formed attitudes and skills affect the integration of word processors into their writing processes. And we need be aware of students like Jay who, despite choosing to take his writing class on a word processor, approach word processors with apprehension because they identify them as computers.

Innovations that capitalize on the links between

computer programming skills and their expository writing have already been suggested by Nancy Hoar at Western New England College,[1] and Stuart Hirshfield and John O'Neill of Hamilton College.[2] And programmers themselves talk about the links between writing software and creative writing.[3] We need to look more extensively at the possibility of exploiting our students' computer skills in our writing classrooms.

I cannot extrapolate from this one case study, but suggest that further studies be done to evaluate student writers' attitudes towards computers and to examine how these attitudes affect their integration of the word processor into their writing styles. Further, we must keep in mind that the student writer of today, who learned to write with pen or pencil in hand, will not be the student writer of tomorrow, who may have learned to write on the keyboard.

Notes

1. Nancy Hoar, "Conquering the Myth: Expository Writing and Computer Programming," College Composition and Communication, 38, No. 1 (1987), 93.

2. Stuart Hirshfield, John O'Neill, "A Cycle Called Yourself: Heuristics for Computing and Writing," University of Pittsburgh Computers and Writing Conference, Pittsburgh, 4 May 1986.

3. Lammers, Susan, Programmers at Work, Washington, Microsoft Press, 1986.